



Cover Page



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NARCO-POLITICS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract

Manipur, a beautiful state located on the north eastern periphery of India is trapped in a dungeon of narco-politics. It is a big challenge to the political-economic stability of Manipur, also degrading societal values and posing a threat to the national security. The nexus of state actors and non-state actors is a severe concern that helps to arrest the growth of the state's human resources. The drugs directly or indirectly affect a large section of Manipuri people. The emergence of the Golden Pentagon concept, along with the Golden Triangle, popularises the north eastern states, especially Manipur, to the drug trafficking world. State agencies seize colossal quantities of narcotic substances and regularly destroy acres of poppy cultivated land. The government of Manipur takes up various initiatives to control the state's drug issues. Many voluntary organisations are also working tirelessly to safeguard the state from this threat.

Keywords: Drugs, Corruption, Nexus, Politicians, Youth.

Introduction

Manipur is one of the eight north eastern states of India. It is known as "Kangleipak" or "Sanaleipak" by local inhabitants, which has an area of 22,327 sq. km. It is beautifully surrounded by hilly ranges and is bounded internally by Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram states and internationally by Myanmar. Its international boundary with Myanmar is 398 km long. Manipur is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious state. It comprises major ethnic communities such as Meiteis/Meeteis, Kukis, Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) and Nagas.

Manipur is a landlocked state with a unique topographic extension of the Himalayan Range. More than 90 percent of the total geographical area is hill, and the rest is valley. This valley part is popularly known as Imphal Valley. Nine hill ranges surround this small valley of 1,787 square km. The maximum population of the state lives in this small part. The state has a population of 28.56 lakhs, according to Census 2011. The state has comprised of 16 districts: Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Jiribam, Kakching in the valley area, and Ukhrul, Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, Kangpokpi, Kamjong, Tengnoupal, Noney and Pherzawl in the hill area of the state.

Unfortunately, such a beautiful topography is shadowed by the darkness of the psychoactive substances. India is waging war on the world's two most notorious drug producing fronts. The first front is from the northwestern side of the country that is the "Golden Crescent" which consists of three contiguous countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The second one is from the northeastern side, the "Golden Triangle" which consists of three adjacent southeast Asian countries: Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. The latter one is spreading its areas to other countries like Vietnam, Cambodia and India's Nagaland and Manipur states. This new portion is infamously known as "Golden Pentagon" (Nepram, 2020). This illegal global narcotic influence is a serious matter for the country's national security, especially Manipur.

In North Eastern Region of India, a lot of fake pharmaceutical companies were established in the 1980s and 1990s. Due to the loose regulations, this industry's essential raw chemical materials like acetic anhydride are illegally traded with Myanmar. According to US Drug Enforcement Administration, Myanmar produces 80 percent of the drugs in Southeast Asia and is responsible for 60 percent of the world's drugs supply (Nepram, 2020). Thus, the Northeast States, particularly Manipur, become the transit road between the supplier of raw materials and manufactured finished drugs. Once considered as India's Powerhouse of Sport, Manipur has emerged as a "Convergence Point" for various illegal drugs across the globe.

Narcopolitisation in Manipur

According to author and political analyst Alan Riding, narco-politics is described as the abuse of power to achieve wealth through drug trade and the abuse of power to achieve power, using corruption to seal political alliances, and corruption which makes the wheels of bureaucracy turn. This blood money is one of the safest and fastest ways to mobilize and buy voters.

It would be more appropriate to call the process of funding democratic elections by the money from drug smuggling by politicians to enter political institutions like Legislative Assembly as "Narcoecopolitisation."



Cover Page



Political parties in most of the Indian states use caste politics. Through caste mobilizations and sometimes communal politics, politicians try to vow their voters. But in Manipur politics, political parties' affiliations are not much important as compared with Individual personality. Manipuri voters usually have emotional connections with candidates. If the candidates give money or favour at any moment or incident, maximum voters voted them without scrutinising their candidates' proper background and intention for his election contest.

Criminalisation in Indian politics is not a new phenomenon. There are a lot of committees/commissions constituted to reform this serious issue. Unfortunately, all the political parties across the party line have always been reluctant to combat the criminalisation of politics. Changes happen through judicial interventions that too Public Interest Litigations (PILs). In practice, democracy is a number game. Everything is fair for the winner, and no one counts the runners up. So, political parties used to prefer "winnability" as the sole factor. It shows that means justify the end result in politics. The political parties in India normally blame the onus of electing criminal and (illegal) wealthy candidates on the voters. As a civilized society, this logic is morally unacceptable.

As per data from the latest electoral rolls, Manipur has a total of 19,58,087 voters. Manipur has 60 Assembly Constituencies. Each constituency has around 32,634 voters. Unlike other big states, candidates know most of the voter families, so they easily misuse their power to lure and buy voters in the state. How could legally/hard earned money be illegally wasted for the unpredictable result of the election? Therefore, it cannot be denied that black money plays a crucial role during election times. Recently, Election Commission of India (ECI) has increased the total expenditure of the intending candidate of the Manipur Legislative Assembly from 20 lakhs to 28 lakhs amid the covid-19 pandemic situation. It reduces the scale of election rallies due to this ongoing pandemic. But the pertinent question is that on what logic or parameters, the ECI decided to increase the expenditure amount.

Being a part of liberal democratic country India, Manipur holds regular state legislative assembly elections under the ECI. The 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly election is knocking at the door. This time, the seizure of cash, liquor and drugs might increase with a big jump from last polls. In the last 11th election, a huge amount of suspected heroin powder worth Rs. 12, 15,500, N-10 Capsules worth Rs. 3, 21,530, Spasmo Proxyvon (SP) Capsules worth Rs. 1, 96, 86,315, Ganja worth Rs. 5,34,000, World is Yours (WY) Tablets worth Rs. 1,26,370, Opium worth Rs. 23,48,320, Cough syrup (Tusscodine) worth Rs. 900, Morphine worth Rs. 14,00,000, Zolfresh worth Rs. 65,940, Country liquor DIC worth Rs. 55, 46,235, IMFL worth Rs. 12, 61,368, Beer worth Rs. 66,215 and wine worth Rs. 6,057.5 had seized. (ANI, 2017).

Manipur is an economically backward state as compared with the rest of the country. Yet, according to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the percentage of Sitting Crorepatis MLAs of Manipur in 2022 is 55% (29 out of 53 MLAs). Few legislatures from Manipur have served terms in Delhi's Tihar Jail due to drug trafficking (Nepram, 2020). For the first time in the history of Manipur, 3 people lost their lives and many pre-polls violent incidents have been happening. This brings the question of the legitimacy of the elected representatives. It also exposes the silent acceptance attitude of the Manipuri voters.

Under Section 8 (3) of the Representation of the People Act 1951, if an MP or MLA is convicted for any other crime and is sent to jail for 2 years or more, he/ she will be disqualified for 6 years from the time of release. A person charged for murder, money laundering or rape can become a legislator and even a minister. But a person cannot be appointed if a minor criminal case is pending against him. This example sets a blatant double standard of the judicial system and a clearcut violation of Fundamental Rights under Article 14, which guarantees equality before law (Quraishi, 2021).

Fortunately, the present Manipur government is keen to deal drug menace in the state. So, the state government launched "Nisha Thadoklasi" Campaign on 26th June 2018 on International Day against Drug abuse and illicit trafficking. Again, on 3rd November 2018, Chief Minister of Manipur Shri N. Biren Singh declared "War on Drugs." However, our state is immersed in never-ending political tangles. The recent incident involving a decorated Manipur police officer and a politician of the ruling party over the arrest of a drug kingpin has shed light on the depth of drug infiltration and corruption in Manipur (Singh, 2021). And a police personal arrested with drugs worth over Rs 3 crores in 2013 was declared for the Chief Minister's Gallantry award on August 13, 2020. Later on, the state government withdrew this award due to pressure put by All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), a student organisation based in Manipur (Pisharoty, 2020). Again, drugs worth over Rs 508 crore in the international market were seized at Town Moreh town recently, and different parts of the state, including Imphal Airport, yet law enforcing agencies are not able to catch the drug kingpins. The Kingpins/Drug Lords are still a mystery. It is like as if we are living in Disneyland. That simply means state government prefers to remain quiet or absence of legitimate political authority, hoping that these issues would die as a natural death. It reiterates the suspicion of nexus among the politicians, peddlers, state forces and insurgencies.



Cover Page



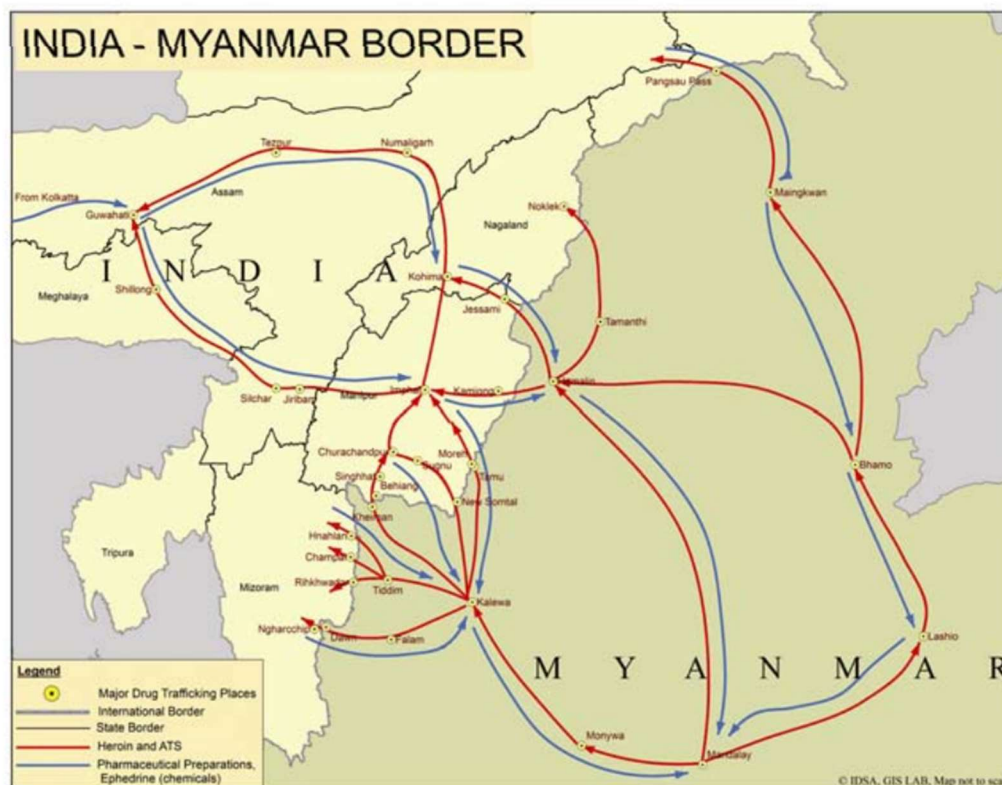
Drug use and trafficking is a serious issue of Manipur. Future chaotic situations if narco-politicians enter into democratic institutions:

1. It will tremendously increase the loss of support or loss of neutrality of the state institutions towards the ordinary people. It will add more legitimate power to these politicians through these illegal means.
2. The nexus network of crimes and narcotics would deteriorate the good governance principles through the penetrating of the state institutions like courts, legislatures, and state armed forces.
3. Common people would blindly start to idolise them as their leaders because of their money and power. These would inspire the educated unemployed youth into this adverse pathway in the future.
4. State security forces could not defend and enter the extreme terrain areas of the hilly region to ensure the protection of citizens from these illegal activities.
5. It will collaterally damage the state's economy. A parallel economy would control the delivery of government services of the society.
6. They will start to claim exclusive territorial control over the strategic areas. Illicit drug people in business promote ethnic based conflict and suspicion. Some communities will be accused as the beneficiaries of this bloody trade. It will increase the trust deficit and segregation of social order among the communities of our heterogenous society.

Challenges that lie ahead of us

The drug smuggling related problems in Manipur are somewhat different from Punjab. In the case of Punjab, there are external proxy agencies from Pakistan cooperating with local mafias. So, it is clear cut considered as narco-terrorist issue and threat to national sovereignty. But in the context of Manipur, rather than narco-terrorism, narco-politics is regarded as the primary concern. Therefore, the challenges come into a whole different dimension.

1. Manipur is geo-strategically located between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is the gateway of India's Act East Policy. Indian railway also operationalises up to Tamenglong district. All these create apprehension among the intellectuals that this region would face the pandora box of global drug mafia because Moreh and Behiang border points of the state have already become the floodgates of heroin from the northwest part of Myanmar.
2. The continuum demand-supply chain coupled with border loopholes favours transportation of narcotic substances through different routes in the north eastern states. According to Manipuri journalist Phanjaobam Tarapot, some of the critical trafficking routes in Northeast India are as follows:
 - 1) Behiang-Singhat-Churachandpur-Imphal,
 - 2) Behiang-Singhat-Tipaimukh-Silchar (in Assam),
 - 3) Tamu-Moreh-Imphal,
 - 4) Homalin-Ukhrul-Jessami-Kohima,
 - 5) Mandalay-Tahang-Tiddim-Aizwal-Silchar,
 - 6) Homalin-Kamjong-Shangshak Khullen-Ukhrul,
 - 7) Myitkina-Maingkwant-Pangsau Pass-Nampong-Jairangpur-Digboi,
 - 8) Putao-Digboi-Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh)-other destinations,
 - 9) Tamarthi (Myanmar)-Noklak (Nagaland-Myanmar Border)-Kohima-Dimapur,
 - 10) New Somtal (in Chandel district)-Sugnu-Churachandpur-Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur, and
 - 11) Kheinan-Behiang-Churachandpur-Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur (Nepram 2020).



Source: Pushpita Das, “Drug Trafficking in India: A Case for Border Security”, IDSA Occasional Paper No. 24, May 2012.

Apart from these well-identified routes, there are several other tracks like air and postal routes used by smugglers for illicit trafficking of drugs. However, local poppy and ganja plantations and pharmaceutical drugs which are traded in black markets and sold over the pharmacies or chemists without prescriptions are ignored. But drugs are drugs, therefore there cannot be any distinction.

3) The common people who have been dropping their living standards while being bombarded with an aspiration of their children are looking to get easy economic support through criminal activities and immigration across the borders. We can analyse the phenomenon of the political economy integration with drugs in two ways. First, once it proves that this business is highly profitable quickly, no drug trafficking activities are restricted into a small quantity or territory. The second aspect is that drug money would integrate into the whole economy through money laundering and corruption. And based on the general economic theory, the drug issue could be easily tackled through the contain and block of the demand and supply chain. However, with the increase of vigilance by the law enforcement agencies and voluntary organisations, drug smuggling continues to fuel under a well-knit network of demand and distribution strategy.

How could other cash crops compete with opium in terms of price, profit and market? Higher returns from the capital and energy invested that exceed other crops drive to continue cultivating poppy plantation despite forceful eradication drives carried out by law enforcing state agencies. These coercive measures push cultivators to remote areas where their presence is weak to avoid any detection. Doing so, strengthens their network system, the production monopoly, and opium trade.

4) They carry out a precise, comprehensive analysis of important factors like mode of transportation, deployment and movement of the security forces, terrains and their local informers. That's how their business becomes well-planned, organised and professional. Time and situation, their modus operandi and execution also change frequently. The smugglers have been forced to innovate because of increased vigilance. They used students and women, and even patients to transport drugs across the state.

5) As per the latest India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2019 published by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Manipur has lost 499 sq. km, which fall almost cent percent in hill districts. Churachandpur district contributes the maximum loss of forest cover. Manipur Forest and Environment Minister Th. Shyamkumar clearly stated that the rampant felling of trees for poppy cultivation in Hill districts contributed lion share for this depletion of forest cover (Leivon, 2020). This fact-finding report of the wildfire of poppy cultivation also supported by the table below.



Cover Page



Estimated Opium Poppy Plants Destroyed by Officials

Name of district	Area of land in acres (approx.)	Quantity of opium produced (in kg) (approx.)	Net value (in Rs crore) (approx.)
Kampong	80	800	5.8
Churachandpur	220	2,200	16
Kangpokpi	100	1,000	7
Senapati	15	150	1.1
Ukhrul	90	900	6.5
Tengnoupal	35	350	2.6
Chandel	90	900	6.5
Total	630	6,300	45.5

Source: Ngamjahao Kipgen, 'Why Are Farmers in Manipur Cultivating Poppy?', EPW, Vol. 54, Issue No. 46, 23 November 2019.

State law enforcing agencies like Narcotic and Affairs of Border, Manipur Police and Assam Rifles regularly destroy hundreds of acres of poppy plants and Marijuana (Ganja) in the state. But various reports show the increasing poppy plantation across the hill areas of the state. The confiscation of different types of narcotic substances is regularly reported in the local daily electronic and print media. It is roughly estimated that 6,000 acres in 2017-2018 are under the poppy plantation in the hill areas of the state. The yearly destruction of this plantation by state agencies with/without the help of civil society groups is nearly 10 percent of the existing cultivated areas (Singh, 2021). This kind of regular exercise is very minuscule.

6) The lack of adequate security posts at different critical points coupled with shortage of manpower and connivance of some officials have led to the free flow of drugs in the state. Even the integrated check post in Moreh is not a foolproof one. State armed forces too sometimes caught while transporting large quantities of drugs. In 2013, A Colonel in the Indian Army was confiscated with nearly 24 crores worth of narcotic drugs at near Parallel Police checkpoint (The Times of India, 2013). This clearly indicates some black sheep in the State actors are involved in drug smuggling. Some insurgent groups also join this nexus to mobilise their financial support. These aspects also increase the discourse of narco-terrorism in the state.

7) Most drug users fall in the adolescent and youthful ages. More than 50 percent of our state's population belongs to this category. Thereby, the loss of this precious population in terms of human capital is beyond imagination. Consumption of narcotic substances puts the limitation of entering and remaining in the workforce and reducing the contribution of state's economy. Therefore, they would again favour consumption which leads to a vicious cycle in our society. This vicious cycle exponentially retards our human capital resources. We have 3,46,690 in 2018 unemployed educated youth in the state as per the data of the Directorate of Labour and Employment, Government of Manipur (The Week, 2020). But in reality, this number would be much more because many youths are still not registered in the employment exchange. This non-utilization of our 76.94 percent literacy rate automatically becomes waste. This would be led to unlawful activities.

According to the National Crimes Record Bureau 2013, Manipur ranked the second most corrupted state in North East after Assam. In 2017, the Government of Manipur initiated Anti-Corruption Cell to tackle cancer like corruption situation in the state. It is an open secret in our society that every government job, including private sector, has a price tag. Some cases registered under the initiative of this cell, but till now, there is no proper white paper on the accountability and progress of the cell to the people of Manipur.

8) No one can deny the real problem of drug pandemic in the state. Half of the population is directly or indirectly affected by psychoactive substances. Imagine the gravity of the situation, we are having right now. The first HIV/AIDS positive in the state was reported from Churachandpur district in 1989. This district is bordering with Myanmar. As per the recently released India HIV Estimation 2019 report, the three states with the highest adult HIV prevalence in the country are Mizoram (2.32% [1.85–2.84%]), Nagaland (1.45% [1.15–1.78%]), and Manipur (1.18% [0.97–1.46%]). A local NGO called Social Awareness and Service Organisation (SASO) estimates nearly 34,500 Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) in Manipur alone. Nearly 10% of drug users in the state are women. Unsafe practices and sharing of needles made Manipur to become the "AIDS capital of India" in the 1990s.

The Government of India has allocated Rs 135 crores to implement the "National Policy for Prevention of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse". The local NGOs have spent sufficient funds. The most affected districts identified by the Action Plan include nine districts of Manipur, namely Churachandpur, Senapati, Bishnupur, Chandel, Imphal East, Imphal West, Kangpokpi, Thoubal and Ukhrul. The Magnitude of Substance Use in India, 2019 report listed Manipur amongst the top 10 alcohol dependent states (Hanglem, 2021). The loss of our potential youths can never be measured with some form of schemes or grant-in-aids.



Cover Page



However, the service assistant to the affected families is a hurdle challenge. In-ground realities, the promise of providing facilities including rehabilitating to these families either not reaching or inadequate to change into other livelihood options that could maintain their basic living standard. It speaks the gap which is existing between the intention and implementation of the policies and programmes in the state.

Responsibilities and duties that lie ahead of us

In recent times, vast quantities of illegal drugs such as heroin, brown sugar, opium, SP tablets, WY tablets and alcohol that have been confiscated indicate that these substances remain a pandemic like Covid-19 in the state. Such a scenario has had happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The people of Manipur, voluntary organisations and state government must tirelessly fight day and night against these illegal activities.

Many Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been working continuously to control these illicit drugs and to promote a drug free state at different levels. Meira Paibis (Women Torch Bearers) takes a leading role in preventing drugs and alcohol uses in every locality at their capacities. Organizations like Coalition Against Drugs and Alcohol (CADA), All Lillong Anti-Drug Association (ALADA) are also working tooth and nail at their best level in their respective level. These organisations have been dedicating voluntarily for the better future of the state.

Manipur Government has announced a cash reward of Rs 10 lakh for the Peh (Paoli) village of Ukhrul district as an appreciation of the effort undertaken by the villagers against the poppy plantation and narcotic drugs (Leivon, 2021). The other villagers must follow this kind of goodwill to better our society. It also announced the cultivation of Lemongrass and other cash crops in the hill districts. With this initiative, the government must provide proper infrastructure across the nook and corner parts of the state.

Manipur is a dry state, yet local liquor like Sekmai, Andro, and Phayeng are available everywhere. We will get some income through regularisation by giving proper infrastructure and investment. This could reduce the sponsor type economy system of Manipur.

International Border wire fencing between India and Myanmar is only a few kilometres, so it must extend to the remaining part. Rugged terrains guard by the Assam Rifles should be in 24*7 mode. We have Free Regime Movement with Myanmar around 16 kilometres without Visa. This makes it convenient for the transportation of large-scale drugs. With the help of the Centre Government, the state government as much as possible to complete proper fencing and regularise this free movement. This will reduce human trafficking too. And the letter and spirit implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system is much in order to properly identify the illegal migrants from other states.

The low conviction rates and delay in punishment under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act 1985, add a giant legal loophole problem. The smugglers can secure bail quickly. The mass media coverage that happened in the alleged drug consumption of Bollywood stars' relatives should also be done all the drugs related cases. And under section 48 of this act, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) is authorised to attach and destroy poppy crops and other narcotic substances illegally cultivated. This act prohibits the cultivation of opium poppy, cannabis, and coca plants without a license. Most of the land in the hill district do not have any legal document and are normally under the control of the village chief as a common property. So, during the raids, officials could not find the owner of the poppy cultivated land. Therefore, it is high time to legalise these properties and proper implementation of land records through appropriate laws.

We must give social awareness among the educated unemployed and adolescents about the negative impacts of consuming drugs, tobacco, and other illegal substances. The present rote learning education must be changed along with the coming National Education Policy 2020. Quality with reality education system is the backbone to reform our fracture, corrupted and drugs ruined society into a prosperous and bright civilizational society.

Conclusion

The drug mafias are driving like a flood in our society. So, state security forces have to empower with modern scientific tools and technologies to counter these mafias. Anti-narcotic action done by the law enforcement agencies should not be resorted in a coercive and hasty manner. The state and centre governments must work cordially along with Myanmar and neighbouring states.



Cover Page



The new measures initiated by the present government have triggered off a new hope. But the critical point is the government's willpower to go beyond the rhetoric, publicity stunt and short-term measures to cope the issue entirely. The people of Manipur deserve a strong political will to tackle drug abuse and drug menace.

Policymakers should extensively analyse the nitty-gritty of social, cultural, political, and economic aspects while formulating a state's drug policy. At the same time, they must learn the lesson from the war against drug campaigns that have had practised in different states and countries. A holistic socio-economic development with local favours is viable to wean people away from these illegal activities.

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